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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
Newport, R.I.**

**The Future of Mexico's Drug War - Balancing Security and Rule of Law  
Against Cartel Freedom of Maneuver**

**by**

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**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

**Signature: //signed, cjh, 28 Oct 11**

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## **Abstract**

The Mexican government is currently embroiled in a difficult struggle to enforce the rule of law over increasingly violent drug cartels. President Calderon has deployed over 50,000 military forces and initiated significant governmental reforms but results are mixed with fatalities skyrocketing over five-fold. Likewise, spillover violence such as extortion, trafficking and kidnapping have exposed the depths of the government's law enforcement shortfalls. To defeat the drug cartel threat to its sovereignty, the Mexican government must both increase its institutional capacity to enforce the rule of law and provide security while also reducing cartel freedom of maneuver to exploit violence and corruptive influence. To a large degree, the essential elements are in place. Mexico has galvanized broad internal and international support for its efforts, but more must be done to achieve lasting results.

## INTRODUCTION

As a nation, Mexico is currently embroiled in a bitter struggle that pits government control against increasingly powerful and violent drug trafficking organizations (DTOs). The Calderon administration has made winning this fight a centerpiece of its agenda. In turn, the government has implemented a broad series of aggressive reforms and offensive operations to include a dramatic increase in the use of military force in law enforcement and counter drug operations; but to what end? Now five years into execution cartel leadership has been disrupted and drug interdictions are up but so too is violence with over 35,000 lives lost and more are sure to follow. The depth of the crisis reinforces the government's imperative to clearly understand the nature of the problem and the necessary actions to achieve its desired effects. In order to achieve a future acceptable peace, Mexico's drug war must create a favorable balance of power between the government's capacity to enforce the rule of law and the cartels' freedom of maneuver to operate indiscriminately.

As the following analysis demonstrates, the strategic context of the drug trade has changed and Mexico arguably faces a very real threat to the government's ability to provide security and rule of law. Although the existence of the drug trade itself is not a new phenomenon, the scope and degree of violence as well as the corruptive influence the cartels currently wield has changed. Meanwhile, quantitative and qualitative shortfalls in the government's ruling capacity have left the country unable to effectively counter or constrain cartel behavior. Moving forward, Mexico's strategy must build broad strong federal and state institutions with the capacity to protect the security of its constituency and enforce the rule of law. In conjunction with this effort, Mexico must holistically reduce cartel strength and relative freedom of maneuver to operate unimpeded by the government's will. While

Mexico cannot eliminate the drug threat completely, it can establish a “satisficing” framework whereby cartel activities are effectively constrained, much as they are in other developed countries. The risks of not doing so threaten the continued legitimacy of the government and pose the risk of a prolonged militarized security posture.

### **OPPOSING ARGUMENTS: LEGALIZATION AND INACTION**

In contrast to directly confronting cartels, others have argued that Mexico’s drug trafficking problem requires a different approach because law enforcement and interdiction regime efforts cannot constrain the multi-billion dollar influence of the drug market. Mexico’s current efforts are posed as too costly and historically too ineffective to succeed. One alternative offered is to instead focus efforts on legalizing the drugs as an indirect way to undercut the profits that sustain the illicit drug trade market. In return, monies can be invested in less costly education and treatment programs. Unfortunately while the argument for undercutting the illegal profits that drive the market has great merit, the overall proposal falls short in addressing the global challenge of legalization. Unilateral actions by Mexico itself would have little impact on the broader international drug trade. Similarly, the argument fails to account for the potential unintended negative effects of the proliferation of affordable and addictive narcotics within Mexico’s impoverished segment of society.

Other critics point to the fact that the drug war cannot be won, and that increasing efforts to target or constrain cartel behavior have only stoked the levels of violence. Instead of attacking cartels, the government should focus on targeting the flow of drugs and money across its borders coupled with protecting the populace. However, this argument largely neglects the conditions that begat this crisis, namely Mexico’s declining capacity to counter

unchecked cartel power. Thus, while costly, Mexico's drug war is, in fact, a necessity for the country to retain its democratic identity with a functioning and capable government.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE ORIGINS OF THE CRISIS**

Mexico's current security and governance crisis in combating increasingly violent drug cartel and transnational criminal elements emerged as a result of both internal and external factors that made it an attractive operating location for drug cartels and their associated networks. Fundamental to this analysis is the requirement to first understand the nature of the drug market and the role that DTOs play in it. Given this baseline, one can see how broader cartel leadership disruptions in the Americas along with Mexico's natural geostrategic position in the drug market created favorable conditions for rising cartel power in the country. The degree to and means by which the cartels advanced their power, interests and influence over the government has been shaped by key cultural and governmental organizational conditions. Thus not any one factor has dominated the development of the current crisis but rather the interrelation between several enabling ones.

From an organizational standpoint, drug trafficking organizations operate from a business model where central power figures or kingpins employ cadres of couriers and gangs to ferry and distribute drugs, launder money, and defend cartel territory. Given the context, this business model is often characterized as a form of organized crime. To profit, cartels depend on steady access to supply and demand and the ability to move drugs and money across borders with limited governmental interference. Thus, where able, cartels have generally operated with fairly disciplined sets of rules and standards. They neither desire nor require to replace the government but rather to marginalize its ability to interfere with their operations. Because the drug trade is transnational, the nexus of cartel power is not

predetermined by any one market dynamic or location but rather by the requirement to coordinate and link the suppliers and buyers in the trade of illicit drugs.

With respect to the rise of cartel power in Mexico, the major catalytic event was the dislocation of the Colombian cartels, in particular the Medelin and Cali cartels. Attacks against the leadership coupled with efforts to dislocate their base of operations created a transnational power vacuum for new leadership and splinter groups to compete for control of the drug trade to the United States.<sup>1</sup> Mexico's natural geography and limited interference by the government made it an ideal location for pre-existing Mexican cartels to expand control over the distribution and cross-border sale of drugs in the United States. Exploiting their pre-existing associations, Mexican cartels consolidated power and developed a robust network of suppliers and distribution channels that linked product from across Latin America to the United States.

Whereas this power shift occurred somewhat subtlety in Mexico and was initially marked by a peaceful rise to power for key Mexican cartels, these current operating conditions have changed. The operating dynamic primarily based upon co-opting government and police non-interference has shifted to one marked by inter-cartel fighting and coercive violence against the citizens and government.<sup>2</sup> At the nexus of this shift has been the effect of decapitation attacks on Mexico's dominant cartel leadership that disrupted the relatively stable bi-polar power base in the 1990s. As a result, several splinter groups have emerged competing for territory and market control. With no governing mechanism to resolve disputes, abundant cartel wealth and arms created a fertile landscape for what has

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<sup>1</sup> Danna Harman, "Mexicans take over drug trade to U.S." The Christian Science Monitor, August 16, 2005, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0816/p01s03-woam.html> (accessed October 20, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> United States Department of Justice, National Drug Threat Assessment 2011, (Washington, D.C.: National Drug Intelligence Center, August 2011), 8.

largely resembled a violent 21<sup>st</sup> century “Mexican land rush” to seize control of country’s drug corridors or “plazas.” As Figure 1 shows, there were seven generally recognized cartels competing for smuggling routes and operating bases in Mexico by 2009. Today, this number has grown to at least ten, although the Beltran Leyva Organization has largely been eradicated.

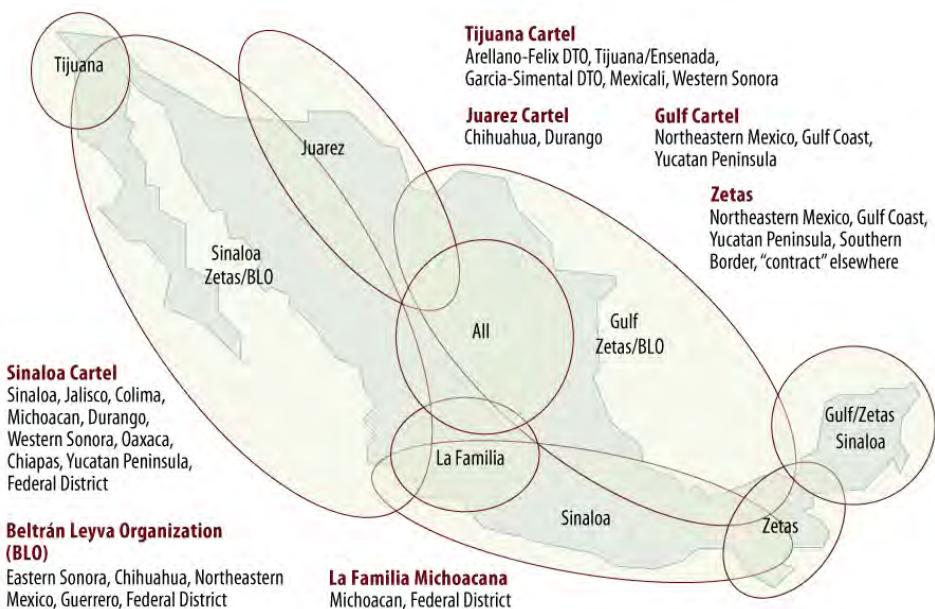


Figure 1 – Mexican Drug Cartels<sup>3</sup>

The violence during this competition for market access and control has been fierce. From 2006 until 2010, cartel related deaths exceeded 35,000 with cross-cartel violence accounting for a majority of the deaths.<sup>4</sup> Previously strong cartels have fractured with new leaders and groups emerging to fill the void. Several of these groups have demonstrated extremely

<sup>3</sup> Graphic borrowed from June S. Beittel, *Mexico’s Drug-Related Violence*, (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, May 27, 2009), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Although not formally tracked by the government, cartel related deaths have steadily increased over 500 percent from 2006 levels and are on track for record highs in 2011. Of this violence, approximately 90 percent has been tied to DTO members but this percentage is decreasing with increased attacks on government and civilian forces involved in counter cartel operations. See David A. Shirk, “Drug Violence in Mexico,” 8.

violent and coercive strategies to secure their control over rivals and the government. In particular, Los Zetas and Knights Templar represent break away elements of former cartels that have scarred the country's psyche with their brutal attacks.

In addition to threats from rivals, cartels have also had to contend with interference by the government and society. Toward that end, cartels previously used money primarily and intimidation secondarily to co-opt and corrupt state and federal law enforcement, judicial and government employees. The confluence of weak judicial and police capacities created the perfect mix for this influence to grow unchecked. As noted author and Foreign Policy Research Institute author George Grayson notes, bribes or *mordidas* were common place practice during the previous 70 year rule of the PRI party. As such, kingpins followed a "1-2-3 System" of million dollar government pay offs for freedom to operate in interior-coastal-border areas respectively.<sup>5</sup> Beyond the payoff of these top officials, countless other lower level personnel were also bribed. In fact, the number of municipal police, politicians and other officials having been investigated or removed from duty in the last five years suggests the problem was widespread and pervasive at all levels and branches of government.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to its susceptibility to corruption, Mexico's government and law enforcement regime suffered from a lack of resources and effort that has hindered its counter drug capabilities. Relative to its neighbors in the Western Hemisphere, Mexico has a smaller per capita civilian security force and military than most.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, its historical

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<sup>5</sup> In essence, cartels paid higher 'access' fees based on the value of the corridors with border areas being the most valuable followed by coastal and then inland ones. See George W. Grayson, "Surge Two: Northward Flood of Mexicans Likely to Increase after U.S. Election," Center for Immigration Studies, October 2008, 2. <http://www.cis.org/articles/2008/back1308.pdf> (accessed September 12, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> In several states, the military and federal police deployments have enabled entire departments to be replaced. As well, Mexico recently had 23 District Attorneys removed or resigned. See Chuck Neubauer, "Mexican Prosecutors Step Down Amid Purge," *The Washington Times*, August 2, 2011, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/aug/2/mexican-prosecutors-step-down-amid-purge/> (accessed September 14, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Chapter 8: Latin America and the Caribbean, The Military Balance, 343-394.

expenditures as a percentage of gross domestic product are relatively low. Prior to Mexican President Zedillo establishing a Federal Preventive Police (PFP) in 1999 Mexico relied almost exclusively on a state and municipal police forces to investigate crimes and enforce the law. However the disparate nature of roughly 2,040 police departments spread across the 31 states greatly impeded information sharing, collaboration and unity of effort.<sup>8</sup> Likewise with only 246,000 total police and security forces there was insufficient capacity to prevent ungoverned areas that could be exploited by more centrally organized DTOs.<sup>9</sup>

One of the more recent and troubling changes in cartel behavior has been the resort to a host of other criminal activities that exploit the citizenry. This spillover violence includes kidnapping, human and arms trafficking and extortion. Whereas previous cartel regimes primarily bolstered local economies and nurtured support from the populace, these offshoot cartels are exploiting the security gap and creating an environment dominated by fear.

In sum, the frequent disruption of cartel power set the conditions for a dramatic increase in violent competition for control of Mexico's drug trafficking corridors. Flush with money and guns, cartels have exploited the vulnerabilities in Mexico's government to pursue their ends. They have widely used violence and money to coerce and corrupt the local populace and government officials. The scope and success of these efforts has exposed deep institutional seams to the government's ability to enforce the rule of law.

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<sup>8</sup> Inigo Guevara Moyano, "Adapting, Transforming, and Modernizing Under Fire: The Mexican Military 2006-11," *Strategic Studies Institute*, 2011, 14-15, <http://www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil> (accessed September 7, 2011)..

<sup>9</sup> 2010 statistics on more than 400 officials charged with corruption show the Gulf Cartel-Zetas as the primary source and their target primarily being municipal level officials. See Robet Benincasa and Angela Hurt, "Reported Cartel Bribes of Mexican Public Officials," *NPR News Investigations*, May 18, 2010. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126893882> (accessed October 21, 2011).

## TOWARD ENFORCING THE RULE OF LAW

In terms of governing capacities, the ability to provide security and enforce the rule of law is a fundamental requirement of government. The impetus for Mexico's current drug war stems from the government's growing realization of the pervasive effects of the localized, bifurcated, and poorly paid nature of the police system combined with the lack of judicial and financial system strength needed to constrain cartel finances and lawlessness. Collectively the government's shortfalls across these spheres had left it struggling to affect any meaningful influence over cartel behavior. The resulting security deficit served to erode the public's confidence and trust in the government and left the people vulnerable to cartel physical and financial coercion.<sup>10</sup>

Because of the crippling effects of corruption and decentralized control at the local level of law enforcement, Mexico's states must rely upon a federalized capacity that can provide the requisite coordination, collaboration, accountability and firepower to engage drug trafficking organizations effectively. Although he was unable to broker a plan to supplant all local law enforcement forces with a broad federal capability, President Calderon did establish the Federal Police (PF) and Federal Ministerial Police (PFM) as key elements of his counter drug force posture.<sup>11</sup> While the two forces provided an important first step to improving centralizing planning and intelligence gathering, they still lacked sufficient numbers to challenge Mexico's cartels in a credible manner.

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<sup>10</sup> According to recent polls, Mexican citizens view security as a prime concern and are even willing to sacrifice personal liberties to improve security. See Pew Research Center, "Crime and Drug Cartels Top Concerns in Mexico," Global Attitudes Project, August 31, 2011, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/08/31/crime-and-drug-cartels-top-concerns-in-mexico/> (accessed September 5, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Calderon's efforts to establish a single federal force were politically untenable and resulted in the stated compromise. See Daniel Sabat, "Police Reform in Mexico: Advances and Persistent Obstacles," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. May 2010, 11-13, [http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/dms76/Policefiles/Sabet\\_police\\_reform.pdf](http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/dms76/Policefiles/Sabet_police_reform.pdf) (accessed October 19, 2011).

Cognizant of this shortfall, President Calderon initiated his proverbial drug war by mobilizing the military's support for counter narcotics; and for their part, Mexico's military forces have played the critical role mitigating the governmental shortfalls in manpower and fighting capacity. Highly respected as a professional force and largely free of the pervasive corruption that plagued local law enforcement, the 200,000 members strong military brought the requisite organization, mobility and firepower to extend the government's reach and offensively disrupt cartel operations. Three particular aspects of the mobilization stand out as critical drivers. First, the military's surge presented a clear, visual symbol of the government's strength and commitment to protect the populace.<sup>12</sup> Second, it presented a strong, mobile force that was largely unencumbered by state borders and cartel corruption. Lastly the military provided an ideal organizational framework for the type of coordination, intelligence gathering, and collaboration necessary to integrate with federal police forces and international actors.

Where employed, the military has provided a "national reserve" that could conduct supporting activities such as establishing checkpoints, guarding crime scenes and participating in special operations. As Table 1 shows, on average Mexico has committed a total of approximately 50,000 military and federal forces in such operations at a rate of approximately two new operations per year.

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<sup>12</sup> The military's role counter drugs started in the 1980s when the Salinas administration declared the issue a national security concern. See Jordi Diez, "The Mexican Armed Forces in Transition," *Strategic studies Institute*, January 2006, 33, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/> (accessed August 31, 2011).

Named Operation	State/Area	Cartel(s) Targeted	Targeted Effect (Size of Force)
Op Michoacan Dec 06	Michoacan	La Familia	Cartel ops & violence, (4K Mil forces)
Op Baja (Tijuana) Jan 07	Baha	Tijuana	Cartel leadership/ops, disarmed Playa de Rosarito police (3.2K Fed/Mil)
Joint Op Nuevo Leon Jan 08	Nuevo Leon & Tamalipas (Monterrey)	Gulf , Los Zetas	Eliminate cartel ops, (3K+ Fed/Mil forces)
Op Chihuahua Jan 08	Chihuahua & Juarez city	Sinaloa, Juarez	Organized crime, violence (2K+ Fed/Mil forces)
Op Sinaloa May 08	Sinaloa	Sinaloa, BLO, Los Zetas	Cartel leadership and drug interdiction (3K Fed/Mil)
Op Solare Sept 08	USA, Italy, Mexico	Gulf cartel	Cartel leadership & personnel, drugs
Op Quintana Roo Feb 09	Quintana Roo (Cancun)	Gulf, Los Zetas	Cartel leadership, municipal police
Op Juarez Feb 09	Juarez	Juarez, Sinaloa	Municipal police, gangs, violence (7K total)
Op Lince Norte Aug 11	Finance & Logistics	Los Zetas	Financial and logistics sectors
Op Veracruz Seguro Oct 11-Pres	Veracruz	Los Zetas, Gulf, Sinaloa	Crime: homicides, extortion, kidnapping

Table 1: Combined Military and Federal Police Operations<sup>13</sup>

With focused operations, tighter security and robust collaboration, these task forces have enjoyed increased success in capturing key leadership targets and exploiting cartel infighting. This level of integration was evident as early as Operation Tijuana in January 2007 where the government successfully integrated over 3,000 personnel from the federal police, Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines in a complex mission incorporating over 30 aircraft, 32 ships, and 247 tactical vehicles aimed at dismantling the Tijuana cartel.<sup>14</sup>

Two key points should be drawn from this data. First, the government's actions suggest a strategy to systematically deploy the military to the country's most violent areas with increasing emphasis on urban areas in the economically important northern border

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<sup>13</sup> Data is not from official military or governmental documents but rather reflects open source Mexican newspaper reporting on the operations.

<sup>14</sup> Andrea Merlos and Maria de la Luz Gonzalez, "Federal Government puts up Operation Tijuana," *El Universal*, January 2, 2007, <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/397765.html> (accessed October 21, 2011).

region of the country. Secondly, the government has found it difficult to end these operations and withdraw federal forces. Thus in terms of effectiveness, the combined military and federal deployments have significantly altered the local balance of power between the government and cartels. However inter-cartel violence remains problematic and further reinforces the importance of a whole of government approach to bolstering security.

One of the down sides of the extensive use of military forces in public law enforcement has been the increased concern over possible human rights abuses that threaten the legitimacy of the military's continued role in domestic policing actions.<sup>15</sup> One attempt to remedy this concern by the populace has been the strong push to subject the complaints to the civil justice system rather than being pursued in military channels. As well, President Calderon has attempted to bolster professionalism and halt the annual desertion of over 17,000 troops by increasing enlisted pay by 46 percent.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, the judicial and financial regimes in Mexico have posed a barrier to success. Too few meaningful cartel members are effectively brought to justice due to inadequacies in investigating, trying and detaining criminals.<sup>17</sup> The secretive, paper based system used rather than oral trials remains vulnerable to corruption. In addition, Mexico's financial and banking systems fail to prevent the laundering of billions of dollars in drug money each year.<sup>18</sup> From a transnational standpoint, Mexico's border security allows the physical transfer of the money across borders as does the cartel's exploitation of legitimate

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<sup>15</sup> According to Mexico's Human Rights Commission data, complaints rose from 8 in 2006 to 1,143 in 2008 and 1320 in 2010. While most do not constitute violations, the trend has placed increasing pressure on the government to turn the cases over to the civil judicial system. See Inigo Guevara Moyano, "Adapting, Transforming, and Modernizing Under Fire," 9-13.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 16-17.

<sup>17</sup> Highlighting this point, Secretary of State Clinton visited Mexico and pledged \$500 million in U.S. support. See Nacha Cattan, "Why Hillary Clinton flagged judicial reforms 'essential' to Mexico's drug war," Christian Science Monitor, January 25, 2011, <http://www.csmonitor.com/> (accessed October 3, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> United States Department of Justice, *National Drug Threat Assessment 2011*, 40-42.

businesses. When coupled with electronic transfers, the net result is a highly profitable market that can easily absorb limited losses to interdiction efforts. Not surprisingly, according to an August 2011 survey, public views on the influence of the courts, media and police have all declined with favorable opinions of the court and police at 32 and 30 percent respectively.<sup>19</sup>

In general, these conditions manifest themselves in the populace's sense of security and trust. Prior to and during the current drug war, safety, security, and crime have dominated individual concerns. By in large, opinion polls show the public strongly approves of the government taking bold steps to reign in cartel behavior because many neither feel safe in their homes nor public.<sup>20</sup> The reporting of extortion fees has increased over 600 percent in five years.<sup>21</sup> These dynamics are compounded by the gruesome nature of many recent killings targeted against individuals or government forces that have openly contested the cartels or gangs. Although Mexico cannot remedy the underlying poverty issue that facilitates a vulnerable populace in the near term, it must provide for security and rule of law.

### **REDUCING CARTEL FREEDOM OF MANEUVER**

In order to bolster governing capacity, Mexico's drug war must also reduce the strength, corruptive influence and allowable range of cartel behavior. As the initial stages of President Calderon's drug war have shown, cartel strength has significantly challenged and in many cases overpowered government forces. To reset this balance, a targeted approach that focuses on the cartel business model, leadership, and ability to exploit violence is

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<sup>19</sup> Pew Research Center, "Crime and Drug Cartels Top Concerns in Mexico."

<sup>20</sup> Pew Research Center, "Crime and Drug Cartels Top Concerns in Mexico."

<sup>21</sup> Ioan Grillo, "Paying for your life in Mexico: The cost of doing business in Mexico now involves bribing drug cartels," *Globalpost*, September 6, 2011., <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/americas/mexico/110905/mexico-drug-war-extortion-felipe-calderon> (accessed September 22, 2011).

essential. No one tool will work in isolation but through a whole of government approach Mexico can shift the balance of power and influence cartel behavior.

By exploiting the Mexican police's low degree of professionalism and susceptibility to pay offs, Mexico's cartels have easily bought desired influence. As Scott Stewart from STRATFOR notes, cartels offer "plata o plomo," which translates to silver or lead, to gain their influence.<sup>22</sup> With respect to "silver," Mexico's Public Safety Secretary recently estimated cartel monthly spending on bribes at \$100 million which is a economic factor that the government cannot compete with.<sup>23</sup> As a result, cartels generally maintained excellent awareness of government intentions. Furthermore according to some reports, they have even had government personnel carrying out their business. In fact, the cartel exploitation of this condition was so pervasive that initial reports from President Calderon's first two years in office estimate that over 11,500 public officials were sanctioned for corruption.<sup>24</sup> Given these institutional seams, simply replacing corrupt officials with new recruits will not work because the underlying shortfalls will render replacements equally corruptible. Instead, capability and professionalization efforts must also accompany the plan. A good example of this is the new State Department program whereby as many as 80 U.S. law enforcement personnel have been embedded with Mexico's SSP academy to train over 4,500 new federal police.<sup>25</sup> According to the State Department, Mexico's goal is to intake a large number of college graduates into the federal police force to better link the force with mainstream

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<sup>22</sup> Scott Stewart, "Corruption: Why Texas is not Mexico," *STRATFOR Global Intelligence*, May 19, 2011, <http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20110518-corruption-why-texas-not-mexico> (accessed August 31, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Tim Johnson, "Mexico struggles to find solution to drug cartel war," *The Wichita Eagle*, August 13, 2010, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2011/0125/Why-Hillary-Clinton-flagged-judicial-reform-as-essential-to-Mexico-s-drug-war> (accessed September 22, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Beittel, *Mexico's Drug-Related Violence*, 9.

<sup>25</sup> Ginger Thompson, "U.S. Widens Role in Battle Against Mexican Drug Cartels," *New York Times*, August 6, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/07/world/07drugs.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/07/world/07drugs.html?_r=2) (accessed September 12, 2011).

society.<sup>26</sup> Increased pay and professionalism efforts will also help the program achieve lasting results.

Because each cartel and drug plaza is unique, no single approach or interdiction strategy will suffice. The specific drugs the cartels target and the means by which they infiltrate them vary by location, and the cartels' increasingly sophisticated array of submarines, ultra light aircraft, cross border tunnels, vehicle traffic, and other human or animal ingestion means presents a formidable challenge to border security and interdiction regimes. In fact, the race to out engineer, out maneuver, and otherwise defeat interdiction and eradication efforts by the government remains a well-funded cartel priority.

Furthermore, losses in one drug market can quickly be offset by gains in another. As data from the 2011 National Drug Threat Assessment shows, overall cocaine entering the United States has decreased during Mexico's drug war. However marijuana production in Mexico more than tripled from 2005 to 2009 and only a fraction of this overall supply is being interdicted.<sup>27</sup>

With respect to the population, the cartels seek to maintain and exploit an available manpower base to execute its operations inside a broader society that refrains from interfering. Toward this end, two fundamental approaches have been employed. Cartels such as La Familia have pursued a win-win scenario whereby they co-opt support and effectively out administer the government in providing essential services, economics and security for the people.<sup>28</sup> In return, the populace reaps the economic benefits of cartel wealth

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<sup>26</sup> United States Department of State, "INL Helps Lead Interagency Investigator Training surge for Mexican Federal Police," The INL Beat, Summer 2009, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/126836.pdf> (accessed October 15, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> United States Department of Justice, *National Drug Threat Assessment 2011*, 13-16, 29.

<sup>28</sup> Samuel Logan and John P. Sullivan, "Mexico's 'Divine Justice,'" *International Relations and Security Network*, August 9, 2009, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/Security-Watch-Archive/Detail/?lng=en&id=104677> (accessed 14 November 2011).

flowing into their cities. Additionally, they abstain from interfering in cartel business or conspiring with governmental efforts to do so. This offers a good example of the organized crime model that can successfully coexist with government rule as long as the cartels efforts to out administer the government are kept in check.

However, the recent degree of violent cross-cartel competition has significantly disrupted the efficacy of this model. Well-armed and militarily trained offshoots like Los Zetas operating in more urban areas have employed a very different influence campaign. Rather than modeling a co-option strategy, the Zetas have relied on extreme violence and clear threatening messages to coerce a submissive opposition.<sup>29</sup> As such, Mexico's government will need a determined approach and likely the help of cartel rivalries (such as the Mata Zetas attacks on Los Zetas) as a means to delegitimize and attrite the Zetas. To the extent that the government can also help shape inter-cartel relationships, it should favor fostering a balance of power rather than a single hegemonic cartel as the desired future state.

<sup>30</sup> The rationale being that a single cartel poses a greater threat to manage than smaller competing ones.<sup>31</sup>

From the perspective of messaging and winning the hearts and minds, the government must recognize and counter cartel attempts to exploit information operations against it.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> John P. Sullivan, "Cartel Info Ops: Power and Counter-Power in Mexico's Drug War," *Mountain Runner*, November 15, 2010, [http://mountainrunner.us/2010/11/cartel\\_info\\_ops\\_power\\_and\\_counter-power\\_in\\_Mexico\\_drug\\_war.html](http://mountainrunner.us/2010/11/cartel_info_ops_power_and_counter-power_in_Mexico_drug_war.html) (accessed August 22, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> According to STRATFOR analysis, cartels are bandwagoning into Sinaloa and Los Zetas camps with a few other independents. See STRATFOR, "Mexican Drug Wars Update: Targeting the Most Violent Cartels," STRATFOR Global Intelligence, July 21, 2011, <http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/20110720-mexican-drug-wars-update-targeting-most-violent-cartels> (accessed October 3, 2011).

<sup>31</sup> See Douglas Farah in "Shared Responsibility: U.S.-Mexico Policy Options for Confronting Organized Crime," Events, *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*, October 22, 2010. <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/shared-responsibility-us-mexico-policy-options-for-confronting-organized-crime> (accessed October 5, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> Danelo argues Los Zetas have attempted this strategy by diverting government attention to violence in the cities so that it can reconstitute in rural areas. See, David J. Danelo, "Toward a U.S.-Mexico Security Strategy:

Recent cartel attempts include media manipulation and efforts to undercut the government's legitimacy. One such example is Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generacion's attempts to supplant the local police. In this case, the cartel essentially declared war on Los Zetas and told the people of Veracruz not to pay the demanded extortion fees.<sup>33</sup> Whether or not the people view the cartel as a hero remains to be seen, but the issue does pose a trust problem for the government.

Given the force multiplying effect that local intelligence and citizen reporting can provide, this trust is imperative. The government must integrate its citizenry into the solution. Waning support from the populace as seen in opinion polls is indicative of need for better strategic communications to outline the drug war's costs, timeline and expectations.<sup>34</sup> Several citizen attempts to use media and the internet have been met with deadly force by cartels.<sup>35</sup> In addition, according to a statement by the Governor of Monterrey, Los Zetas and the Gulf cartel have attempted to pay citizens to protest the military's presence as another means of exploiting the media to discredit the government.<sup>36</sup>

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"The Geopolitics of a Northern Mexico and the Implications for U.S. Policy," FPRI, February 2011, 20, <http://www.fpri.org/pubs/201102.danelo.geopoliticsofnorthernmexico.pdf> (accessed September 6, 2011).

<sup>33</sup> STRATFOR, "Body Dumps of Zetas Members in Veracruz," STRATFOR Global Intelligence, September 29, 2011, <http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/20110928-mexico-security-memo-zetas-defensive-veracruz> (accessed October 6, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> According to Pew statistics, President Calderon's overall ratings are down slightly from 68% to 55% as are the impressions that the country is moving in the right direction. See Pew Research Center, "Crime and Drug Cartels Top Concerns in Mexico."

<sup>35</sup> Several of the recent gruesome killings have been targeted against civilians opposing the cartels to include the hanging and decapitating of journalists. See Sara Rafsky, "Mexico Murder may be Social Media Watershed," *Committee to Protect Journalists*, September 30, 2011, <http://www.cpj.org/americas/mexico/> (accessed October 5, 2011).

<sup>36</sup> These protests lasted over 6 days and included women and children. See Jonathan Tapia, "Gulf Cartel behind Protests: Governor," The Universal, February 17, 2009, [http://www.microsofttranslator.com/bv.aspx?ref=SERP&br=ro&mkt=en-US&dl=en&lp=ES\\_EN&a=http%3a%2f%2fwww.eluniversal.com.mx%2fnotas%2f577567.html](http://www.microsofttranslator.com/bv.aspx?ref=SERP&br=ro&mkt=en-US&dl=en&lp=ES_EN&a=http%3a%2f%2fwww.eluniversal.com.mx%2fnotas%2f577567.html) (accessed September 23, 2011).

In response to the murder of 52 civilians in the Monterrey Casino attack, President Calderon labeled the violence as acts of “true terrorists.”<sup>37</sup> By changing the context from law enforcement to terrorism, the declaration opens the door increased options in dealing with both the perpetrators of these attacks and their supporters.<sup>38</sup> While it is too early to determine the effectiveness of this shift, it nonetheless signals the government’s resolve to win and unwillingness to back down to cartel pressure.

One area where such resolve could have significant potential to reduce cartel wealth, power, and retaliatory options is in the government’s ability to reduce the flow and laundering of drug money. However, to do so Mexico must act decisively on measures to reduce financial loopholes and banking rules that currently allow the successful laundering of billions of dollars in drug profits entering the country. Although such policies will necessarily pull money out of local areas that are currently benefiting from the spillover economic windfall, the imperative remains just the same.

However, perhaps the most controversial element of the government’s strategy has been the highly successful targeting of key cartel leadership figures. As previously discussed, the resulting effect is to create a power vacuum that may or may not be filled by a more favorable cartel leader in the eyes of the government. Regardless, the Calderon administration appears firm in their belief that these leaders who are either too powerful or violent to be co-opted toward a more acceptable business practice must be eliminated.

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<sup>37</sup> Miguel Angel Gutierrez, “Mexico’s Calderon berates U.S. after casino attack,” *Reuters* August 26, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/> (accessed October 5, 2011).

<sup>38</sup> U.S. Congressman Michael McCaul has made the same “terrorist” assertion twice. See Geoffrey Ramsey, “US Congressman Repeats Call to Designate Mexican Drug Gangs as ‘Terrorists’,” *In Sight*. October 5, 2011, <http://insightcrime.org/criminal-groups/guatemala/ms-13-guatemala/item/1663-us-congressman-repeats-calls-to-designate-mexican-drug-gangs-as-terrorists> (accessed October 20, 2011).

Moving forward, the government must demonstrate its capability, will and intent to reign in cartel violence and corruption. Actions must be tailored and specific in order to signal the right message to the right cartels at the right time. While a reduction in cartel strength is necessary, the goal of the government's strategy should not be one of pursuing total cartel defeat because the nature of drug market profits ensures that a new one will emerge. Instead, the government must recognize the limits of its ability to control the situation and instead pursue an evolving détente with the cartels. This balance between the cartel freedom of movement and government control should be marked by clear boundaries of unacceptable behavior such as terroristic violence and overbearing corruption.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Success in Mexico's drug war hinges up on the dual requirement to bolster the government's capacity to enforce the rule of law while also reducing the drug cartels' freedom of maneuver to exploit violence, corruption and intimidation against Mexico's government and populace. The essential elements of a plan are in place for Mexico to achieve the capacity to define the future nature of drug trafficking organizational behavior. As the Calderon administration looks to consolidate gains, the following factors should be considered.

- The government must further expand its federal law enforcement forces or risk a permanent militarization of the drug war. Professionalization, accountability, and merit based promotions and oversight are fundamental capacity building goals.
- The government must carefully consider the future of its decapitation strategy in order to increase the efficiency of its efforts to reshape acceptable DTO behavior. Efforts

against extremist cartels such as Los Zetas will remain appropriate but continued cartel instability sustains a fertile environment for plaza competition and spillover violence.

- Mexico must better integrate and protect the populace as key participants of its counter drug intelligence efforts. Recent brutal attacks against media and citizens attempting to report cartel activity must be prevented to sustain trust and participation.
- The influx of illegal arms combined with Mexico's domestic gun laws places the populace at risk to criminal violence. Gun reform or other interdiction efforts to reduce this vulnerability are essential to curbing the rising tide of criminal violence.
- The government must develop niche federal force capabilities to exploit cartel fractures and disorganization through infiltration and disinformation capabilities. Bilateral federal and military information sharing as well as intelligence fusion center concepts are key enablers that will help reduce the vulnerability of local and state forces.
- Because states are reluctant to give up their municipal police, the government should clearly delineate responsibilities. Federal efforts should focus on major operations to include: intelligence gathering, borders, financing and leadership. Municipal efforts should focus on law enforcement and improving local security as a means to bolster community trust and ties. By scoping the role of local forces in major counter drug operations, the government will reduce their ‘value’ to the cartels.
- With an approaching election, political will to achieve significant gains may be at its nexus. The government must build on the collectively sense of urgency and aggressively pursue key elements of Merida, Beyond Merida and Platform Mexico.

## CONCLUSION

Mexico is embroiled in a bitter fight to reassert its ability to enforce the rule of law against powerful and increasingly violent drug cartels. The impetus for this conflict centers on two interrelated issues: the government's deficit of professionalism and core institutional capacity and the cartels' insatiable demand for control of Mexico's multi-billion dollar drug trade market. The success of Mexico's drug war hinges upon the ability of the government to shift the relative balance of power toward its ability to enforce the rule of law and away from the cartels' desired freedom of maneuver. The risks are very real, over 35,000 lives have already been lost in the fight and as Joel Kurtzman from the Milken Group notes if Mexico "can't offer the citizens courts, mayors and police that are safe and honest...this is likely to remain a stalemate with a lot of violence for a long time."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Chris Hawley, "Drug cartels threaten Mexican stability," *USA Today*, February 9, 2010, [http://www.usatoday.com/NEWS/usaedition/2010-02-10-mexicocartels10\\_ST\\_U.htm?csp=34](http://www.usatoday.com/NEWS/usaedition/2010-02-10-mexicocartels10_ST_U.htm?csp=34) (accessed August 31, 2011).

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